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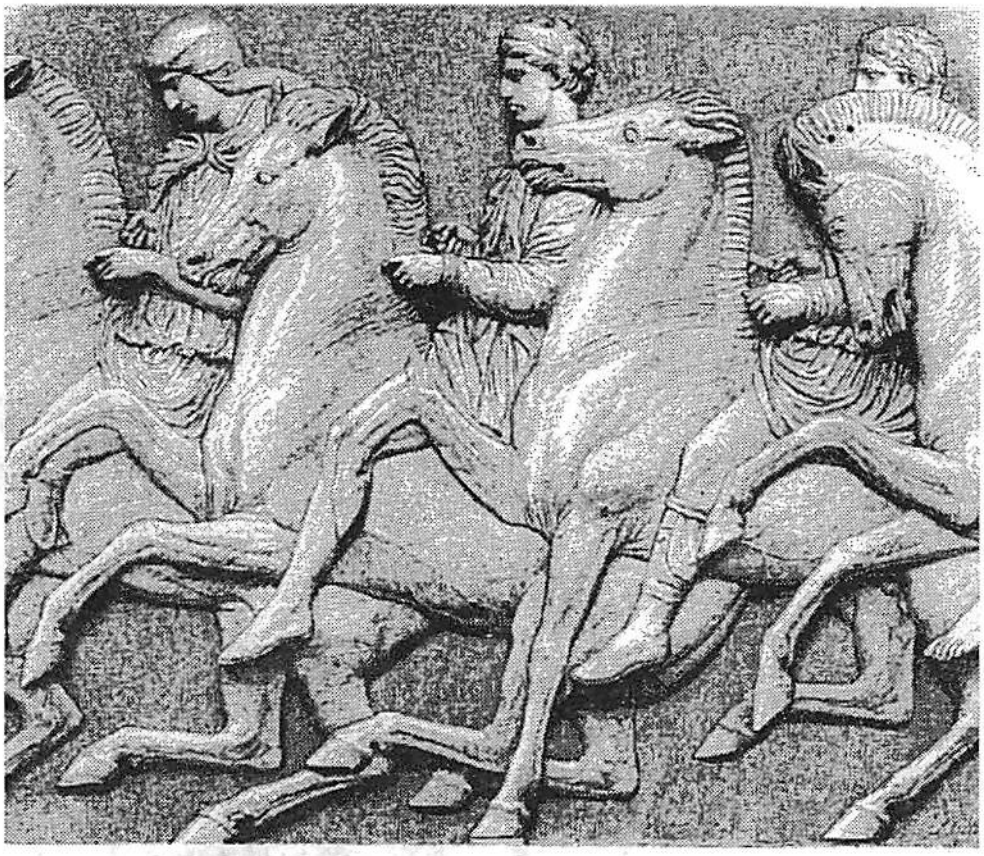

Saint Mary's College of California

THE UNDERGRADUATE

The Newman Prize Essays 1998-99

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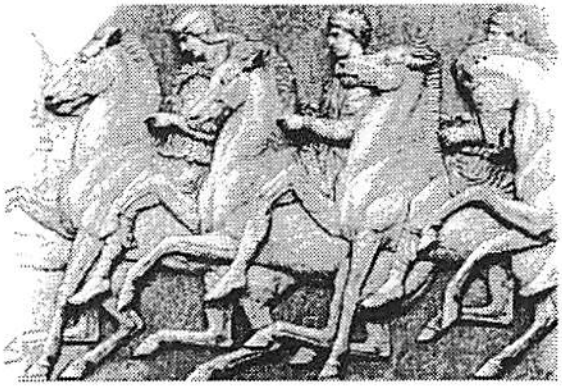

On the Cover

A section from Phidias's Parthenon frieze captures the amazing detail, dramatic energy, and noble spirit that characterized the whole Acropolis complex.

In Memory of

Sam K. Lee, Ph.D.

Class of '69

A scholar of Asian–U.S. relations
whose dedication to students and educators
made him loved and respected by
everyone he touched.

The Newman Awards

Greek Thought: Homer
David Potter
Stephanie Simons

Greek Thought: Drama
Brian Anthony McNutt

19th & 20th Century Thought
Erin Brennan
Kelly Myers

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Editorial: The Emperor's New Clothes?

by Barry Horwitz

Remember the tale of the emperor's new clothes? The emperor, an arrogant ruler, orders fine new clothes to be woven from the most expensive and exquisite fibers. When confidence men show him invisible cloth, he vainly *pretends* to see it, succumbing to their flattery. His courtiers also pretend to see the cloth. On the day he puts on the "clothes" and parades through the city, all the people pretend to admire the clothes —until a child cries out, "The emperor has no clothes!"

The Newman Prize essays have some affinities to the emperor's dilemma. When some people read them, all dressed up to meet the public, they say, "They're too good. I can't write that well." While others will say, Those essays aren't really that good. I can do better." And still others will say, "Those essays need revision." And they would *all* be right: **although these essays have many engaging ideas and approaches, they also have unrealized potential that revision could bring forth.** We bring them to you largely as they were written, with the main idea of each essay in bold-faced type. They exist so that you can decide for yourself if the main idea of each essay is clear and precise enough, if the examples really support the thesis. Is there enough analysis? Does the writer provide us with an opposing view? *You* can decide how well the emperor is dressed—so that you can learn to weave even finer essays this year.

For last year's Greek Thought seminars, David Potter wrote "Penelope: Devotion Knows No Bounds," in which he shows how Odysseus' wife uses so-called "masculine" qualities to fight for herself and her husband. Homer has her use her brains and her strength to become a new kind of powerful woman who challenges her male-dominated world. In the essay, "Odysseus: A Much-Need Serving of Humble Pie," Stephanie Simons focuses on the ways that Homer

reveals Odysseus' human failings, humbling him as he learns to accept his flaws. We can more easily identify with her version of Homer's Odysseus.

In the Greek drama section, in his essay, "Woman's Fighting Nature," Brian Anthony McNutt claims that "both Aeschylus and Sophocles illustrate that women are by nature fit to fight against men." He shows that low social status has historically been used to demean women.

In the modern period, in "What Is a Martyr?" Erin Brennan uses Melville's *Billy Budd* and Unamuno's "San Emmanuel the Good, Martyr," to probe the meaning of the word martyr. She redefines the concept of martyr for us. In "Accepting the Offering," Kelly Myers uses the Multicultural Seminar text, *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko, to look closely at the Pueblo Indian culture. Myers explores the ways that Silko uses the memories of her World War II veteran, who struggles with his alcoholism, depression, and memories of the war. She shows how Silko uses colors to chart his recovery.

Thanks for writing genuine, heartfelt essays. Thanks to Theo Carlile, Joe Subbiondo, Brother DeSales Perez, Bob Gardner, Rosemary Thomas, and the Newman judges who read so many essays.

The Newman Judges

Mori Achen • Jerry Bodily • Patrick Downey
Rebecca Falk • Broother Martin Fallin • Bob Gardner
David Gentry-Akin • Charles Hamaker • John Knight
Deanne Kruse • Joseph Lanigan • Caralinda Lee
Chris Miller • Brother Raphael Patton
Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo • Eddie Sorci • Pat Steenland
Grete Stenersen • Diana Wu

Penelope: Devotion Knows No Bounds

David Potter

In Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, Penelope is the picture of an ideal wife: intelligent, loyal, and devoted. Understanding the bounds of her role as a wife, she maneuvers to enable herself to wait for Odysseus. While her husband is gone and her son is not yet of age, Penelope is the keeper of the house—but only for as long as she can keep her place at her husband's hall. After the suitors believe that her husband has died, she has a limited amount of time left before she must marry again, as her social position decrees. After an appropriate grieving time has elapsed, she must choose a husband herself, or go back to her father who will choose one for her. But she remains committed to Odysseus, in case he may still come home. In a culture where symbolism means so much, she wishes to show her devotion to her husband by waiting for him as long as she can—even after she herself believes he is dead.

Unfortunately, as a woman in the culture of ancient Greece, it is inevitable that her efforts will fail. Sooner or later the boundaries of her gender will close around her and she will be forced to choose a husband. As a woman in Greek society, her freedom to maneuver is severely limited. Recognizing this, Penelope sees a way out of her female predicament: she becomes the mouse who rises above the dead end maze and climbs over and above the walls surrounding her. **Penelope proves her boundless devotion to Odysseus by defeating the suitors, transcending the constraints of her role as a woman, and assuming the symbolic role of a man.**

As the wife of a warrior who is assumed to have lost his life, Penelope is placed in a position where she must choose another husband. The suitors who have come to win her are ready to marry her, but she does not want to marry. She wishes instead to wait for Odysseus to return.

Penelope is locked in battle with the suitors: she wants to delay and avoid a marriage, while they want to press her

into marrying one of them. If she wins, she will successfully put off the suitors and wait for her husband. If they win, a suitor will take her hand in marriage and she will have to abandon her loyalty to Odysseus and give it to her new husband. If Odysseus comes home, she will be forever tarnished as a disloyal wife who conspired to commit adultery. But in accordance with the bounds placed upon her as a woman in ancient Greece, she is doomed to lose. She maneuvers as best she can within her limitations, but she will, in the end, be forced to marry.

Penelope sees a way out of her female predicament.

The first step she takes is to allow suitors of every kind in her hall. If she is to buy any time at all, she must entertain the suitors and pretend to be indecisive in choosing which one to marry. The more suitors there are, the longer time it will take. But before long the suitors find out and call her on it. When Telemakhos makes a speech reproaching the suitors for staying at his father's hall for so long, Antinoos speaks in their defense.

> . . . . . the suitors are not to blame—
> it is your own dear, incomparably cunning mother.
> For three years now—and it will soon be four—
> she has been breaking the hearts of the Akhaians,
> holding out hope to all, and sending promises
> to each man privately—but thinking otherwise.
> (II, 94-99)

To delay a marriage longer, Penelope must invent additional reasons for not selecting a winner. She next tells the suitors she must finish a shroud she has been weaving for her father-in-law's funeral before she can give herself over to choosing a husband.

> 'Young men—my suitors, now my lord is dead,
> let me finish my weaving before I marry,
> or else my thread will have been spun in vain.
> It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes
> when cold Death come to lay him on his bier.'
> (XIX, 168-171)

She stalls the suitors for a good while, but again they become aware of her ruse, this time from her own maid, and they call her on it:

> 'Let me finish my weaving before I marry'
>
> . . .
>
> So everyday she wove on the great loom—
> but every night by torchlight she unwove it;
> and so for three years she deceived the Akhaians.
> (II, 104-123)

With her deceptions exposed, Penelope runs out of excuses. As her options before her evaporate, and the realization that in her current state she must concede defeat, Penelope's physical condition begins to deteriorate. The maze in front of her shows she is at a dead end. But perhaps she will overcome it. She will have to choose a suitor. Or at least she must appear to.

With defeat dangling in sight, Athena unfolds the rest of her plan, and Penelope moves with a new authority, a deliberate catalyst for the suitor's "bloody" demise (XXI, 5). "Moving stairward / the queen took up a fine doorhook of bronze, / and led her maids down to the a distant room / a storeroom where the master's treasure lay" (XXI, 6-10). Here the tone of the text changes. Previously Penelope has been a model of femininity. But now she is moving stairward with male autonomy. In her female role she would have first spoken to her maids. She is leading them—in the sense that she is starting off to the "master's" treasure room herself and

her maids are hurrying to catch up. She is beginning to take on masculine traits.

It is when Penelope arrives at her lord's treasure room door that the sexual undertones begin. Throughout Penelope's time as a symbolic male, her masculine authority is reinforced with masculine sexual references. Here it is begun with the doorhook which Penelope placed inside the door.

> [Penelope] pushed her hook
> into the slit, aimed at the bolts inside
> and shot them back. Then came a rasping sound
> as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—
> a bellow like a bull's vaunt in a meadow.
> (XXI, 47-53)

With her deceptions exposed, Penelope runs out of excuses.

Penelope pushes her male piece, the hook, into the female piece, the slit, vividly illustrating Penelope's switch to a symbolic masculine role. Homer continues Penelope's masculinity with the juxtaposition of her female frame with strong solid structures such as the "oaken sill, cut long ago / and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare / the doorjambs and the shining doors were set / by the careful builder" (XXI, 44-47). This serves to build the bulk and strength of Penelope's masculine image. The "tremendous bow" and "quiver spiked with coughing death," both masculine instruments of death and war, further reinforce her switch to a male role (XXI, 62-63). Even her maids are given masculinity as they carry the "basket full of axeheads, bronze / and iron" (XXI, 64-65).

Penelope reaches a crossroad with her feminine and masculine roles. "Herb-scented robes / lay there in chests, but the lady's milkwhite arms / went up to lift the bow down from the peg / in its own polished bowcase" (XXI, 53-56). Penelope is presented with a difficult decision, but she presses on. Intent on moving forward in her masculine state, Penelope is reminded of her feminine ways of things when she sees robes lying in the chests. "Now Penelope / sank down, holding the weapon on her knees, / and drew her

A Much-Needed Serving of Humble Pie

Stëphanie Simons

For many years, the people of Ithaka have been deluded by the big muscles and great achievements of their king, Odysseus. To them, the fierce warrior is an almighty god. However, during his chastening struggles in *The Odyssey,* Odysseus awakens to the painful realization that he cannot live up to his god-like reputation. For the very first time, Odysseus is introduced to his unfavorable human weaknesses. Fortunately, he is able to accept his flaws and learn valuable lessons from them.

Through maturity and discipline, Odysseus' weaknesses are ultimately turned to his own use and profit. **Hence, the wanderings of Odysseus serve as a series of tests he must undergo before ultimately humbling his character and reclaiming his place on the Ithakan throne.**

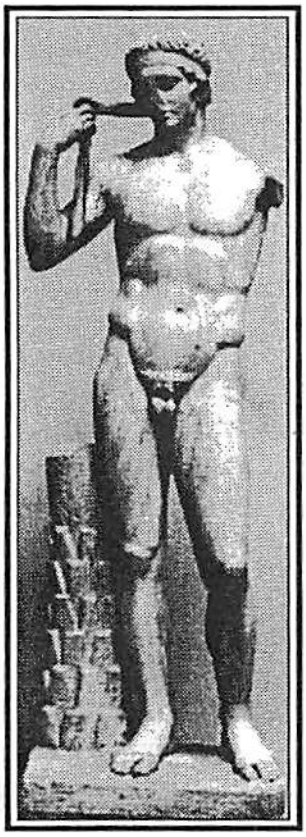
Odysseus is fully aware of his god-like reputation. This pride is his most destructive human weakness: "Men hold me / formidable for guile in peace and war: / this fame has gone abroad to the sky's rim," he brags. (IX, 21-23). Odysseus' arrogance serves as the basis of his torment. His encounter with the Kyklopes in Book IX is the first in a series of events where the warrior gets carried away in his pride. He demonstrates both a lack of modesty and common sense when he foolishly identifies himself to the pain-stricken monster:

> If ever mortal man inquire
> how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him
> Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:
> Laertes' son, whose home's on Ithaka!
> (IX, 549-552)

He demonstrates both a lack of modesty and common sense.

It is careless of Odysseus to admit that he is responsible for blinding Poseidon's son. As punishment for his unruly ego, he and his crew are subjected to the wrath of the God of Sea and Earthquake. Unfortunately, Odysseus must learn the hard way that his arrogance is catastrophic. Having learned the value of prudence from his experience with the one-eyed Kyklopes, Odysseus cautiously protects himself for the rest of his adventure. Upon returning to his homeland, Odysseus abstains from revealing his true identity. He disguises himself as "an old outcast, a beggar man, / leaning most painfully upon a stick, / his poor cloak, all in tatters, looped about him." (XVII, 257-259). His disguise is successful in deceiving all but his faithful dog, Argos, and most loyal servant,

Eurykleia. This gives Odysseus time to patiently evaluate his situation before taking revenge on the suitors who have corrupted his palace. Even when first reunited with his wife, Penelope, Odysseus strains to remain silent about his identity, fully aware of what doom may be in store if he hastily blows his cover.



Much like Poseidon and his son, the beautiful goddesses Kalypso and Kirke contribute to humbling Odysseus' character. These immortal women are responsible for making him come to grips with the fact that he is not a god and his reputation is false. Although each one fails in her attempts to make him lose thought of his "dear fatherland," they do succeed in tempting Odysseus with sexual favors. In Book X, Odysseus recognizes that his limits are the same as any other mortal man: "being a man, I could not help consenting," the brave warrior admits to Kirke as he succumbs to her "flawless bed of love" (X, 452). For the first time, Odysseus realizes that he possesses weaknesses common among all mortal men and is forced to accept that he is not a god.

When tempted by the Sirens' tantalizing song, Odysseus refuses to foolishly give in to his temptation, as he did with Kalypso and Kirke. To protect his crew, Odysseus plugs their ears with wax so they cannot hear the music. However, wishing to hear the Sirens' chant in order to prove that he can withstand temptation, Odysseus gives direct orders to his crew:

> ... you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
> erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,
> and if I shout and beg to be untied,
> take more turns of the rope to muffle me.
> (XII,195-198)

"Being a man, I could not help consenting."

Indeed, this plan is successful. Odysseus is unable to fight free of his restraints, and the ship sails past the dangerous women, unharmed.

Unfortunately, in Book X, unrestrained temptation gets the best of Odysseus' crew. Unlike their brave leader, they have not learned how to discipline their weaknesses and are compelled to open the bag of wind given to Odysseus by Aiolos. The entire crew suffers as the winds inside the bag come gusting out, causing turbulence on the sea, and taking their ship back to the shore where the men first started.

While Odysseus is not the only character in *The Odyssey* who portraits destructive human weaknesses, he is the only one who attempts to overcome them. Ironically, he becomes a stronger character once he learns to accept his weaknesses. With maturity and discipline Odysseus' shortcomings, though sometimes dangerous, prove to be helpful tools. Fortunately, he realizes that while he may be able to turn them to his own use and profit, they can never be completely subjugated. From his adventures, Odysseus develops a new understanding for the value and sanctity of human life, a trait that will serve him well as he continues to reign as Ithakan ruler.

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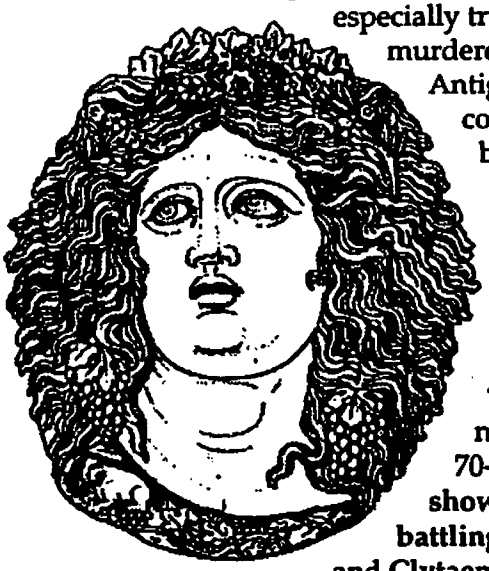
This essay was written for Myrna Santiago and Frank Murray's Greek Thought Seminar.

Woman's Fighting Nature

Brian Anthony McNutt



Both Aeschylus in *The Oresteia* and Sophocles in *Antigone* write of women whose lives end in ruin. This is especially true of Aeschylus' Clytaemnestra who is murdered by her son, Orestes, and Sophocles' Antigone who takes her own life after Creon condemns her to death. Both women die because they chose to battle against men: Clytaemnestra conspired to murder her husband, Agamemnon, and Antigone disobeyed Creon by burying the corpse of her brother, Polyneices. Antigone's sister, Ismene, sheds light on one possible explanation for their failures: "... we are only women, / not meant in nature to fight against men" (*Antigone* 70-71). **Both Aeschylus and Sophocles show that by nature, women are capable of battling against men; the failures of Antigone and Clytaemnestra are better explained by a woman's disabling social status.**

Both Aeschylus and Sophocles illustrate that women are by nature fit to fight against men. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytaemnestra lures Agamemnon into their home, draws him a warm bath, then slaughters him, his bath turning pink as blood pours from his wound into the warm water.

Clytaemnestra says to the chorus, "Here is Agamemnon, my husband made a corpse / by this right hand—a masterpiece of Justice" (*Agamemnon* 1429-30). But the fight in her does not end there. She not only strikes down her husband, king of Thebes, but defends her act as just to the men who were witness to her deathly deed. She argues that she is no more villainous than Agamemnon himself, who, at an earlier time, took the life of their daughter Iphigeneia.

> And now you sentence me? —
> you banish *me* from the city, curses breathing
> down my neck? But *he* —
> name one charge you brought against him then.
> He thought no more of it than killing a beast
> ...
> but he sacrificed his own child, our daughter.
> (*Agamemnon* 1437 - 1442)

Clytaemnestra believes her deed was no more ruthless than that of her husband. Yet the onlookers are appalled by her deed. To them, she butchered more than a man: she slaughtered a hero. But this makes no difference to Clytaemnestra.

She argues that she is no more villainous than Agamemnon.

> Didn't the law demand you banish him? —
> hunt him from the land for all his guilt?
> But now you witness what I've done
> and you are ruthless judges.
> (*Agamemnon* 1445 - 1448)

Despite the men's harsh words, Clytaemnestra does not waver. "Threaten away! / I'll meet you blow for blow" (*Agamemnon* 1448 1449). Clytaemnestra is a woman who fights a man's fight, who resorts to a man's form of justice. She says of her deathblow, it was "no stealthier than the death he dealt / our house and the offspring of our loins, / Iphigeneia, girl of tears. / Act for act, wound for wound!" (*Agamemnon* 1552-1555) Clytaemnestra has a wickedness about her. She is vengeful and cunning. She lay in wait, luring him into her trap, then pounced on her victim before he could defend himself. Ismene says that women are not "by nature" meant to fight against men. But Clytaemnestra not only fights against a man, she defeats a hero and then shamelessly defends her actions as just. Through Clytaemnestra, Aeschylus shows that women are by nature capable of fighting against men.

Similarly, Sophocles' Antigone is a woman who faces a man, unafraid, and reveals her battling nature. Creon orders the body of her brother, Polyneices, to be left unburied. "You shall leave him without burial; you shall watch him / chewed up by birds and dogs and violated" (*Antigone* 224-225). But Antigone defies his unlawful decree. "*I* myself will bury him. It will be good / to die, so doing" (*Antigone* 82-83). And not only does she wish to carry out the defiant deed, but she also calls for notoriety. Ismene assures Antigone of her secrecy, but Antigone answers, "Oh, oh, no! shout it out. I will hate you still worse / for silence — should you not proclaim it, / to everyone" (*Antigone* 99-101).

So Antigone clashes with Creon. She defies his royal law and stands up to him, like Clytaemnestra to her accusers, as a woman who has acted justly. She trades blow for blow with Creon, wit for wit.

> Yet how could I win a greater share of glory
> than putting my own brother in his grave?
> All that are here would surely say that's true,
> if fear did not lock their tongues up.
> (*Antigone* 547 - 550)

But Creon asserts that Polyneices does not deserve the same honor in death as Eteocles, for he "sought to burn with fire from top to bottom / his native city . . . " (*Antigone* 218-219). But Antigone argues, "The god of death demands these rites for both" (*Antigone* 570).

Antigone takes a dangerous stand by opposing her king. She acts on her belief that she is right, that her concept of justice is sound, despite the wishes of a more powerful man. And in defiance, she defends her position with both passion and reason. Antigone, like Clytaemnestra, reveals that women, according to Sophocles, *are* "by nature" capable of battling against men. If the contrary were true, neither character would have been able to carry out their defiant deeds.

They would have been dependent on an alliance with a male character who would have somehow had to empower them. But this was not the case. Although Clytaemnestra was accompanied by Aegisthus, she was alone when she carried out the deed. In addition, in their poise and passion when defending themselves, both Clytaemnestra and Antigone, reveal their independent and capable *fighting natures.*

Therefore, women are capable of battling against men, for their natures do not prevent their fighting. Yet it seems that when women do attempt to fight against men, they lose. Aeschylus and Sophocles illustrate that it was not their feminine natures that guaranteed their failures. Rather, their deaths were the result of an inhibiting social status.

She trades blow for blow with Creon.

Creon tells his son, Haemon, "we must not let people say that a woman beat us" (*Antigone* 734). And Apollo testifies to Athena,

> The woman you call the mother of the child
> is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed,
> the new-sown seed that grows and swells inside her.
> The *man* is the source of life — the one who mounts.
> (*The Eumenides* 666 - 669)

Both Aeschylus and Sophocles expose sexist views prevalent in ancient times. Apollo's accusation and Creon's concern are telling indicators of Greek attitudes toward women. But these attitudes are not surprising. Throughout Greek literature (and, in fact, world literature) women are commonly relegated to an inferior status. And this is a tale that plays itself out in striking clarity in the plays by Aeschylus and Sophocles. Antigone and Clytaemnestra meet their doom because of the Greek power structure as presented in *The Oresteia* and *Antigone.*

Antigone, even with justice on her side, loses to Creon simply because he had power. She decides to betray the unlawful decree of Creon in order to be right with a higher

order, because, "The time in which I must please those that are dead / is longer than I must please those of this world" (*Antigone* 86-87). She believes that what she did was right, and she is not alone. Haemon says,

> the city mourns for this girl; they think she is dying
> most wrongly and most undeservedly
> of all womenkind, for the most glorious acts.
> (*Antigone* 747-749)

And when Creon says, "Is *she* not tainted by the disease of wickedness?" Haemon replies, "The entire people of Thebes says no to that" (*Antigone* 792 -793). And, finally, the seer Teiresias indisputably prophesies, "You have thrust one that belongs above / below the earth, and bitterly dishonored / a living soul by lodging her in the grave" (*Antigone* 1136-1138).

So Antigone was just in her defiance, but she was defeated anyway. Justice could not save her in life because her adversary was Creon: a man and a king who had the power

to determine his own justice. It wasn't until prophesy intervened that Creon's hold loosened, but by then it was too late for Antigone. Through the irony of Antigone's sense of justice and Creon's unyielding power, Sophocles illustrates how women are rendered powerless, not by weak natures, but by their disabling social status.

As in *Antigone, The Oresteia* also illustrates the negative Greek attitude towards women. This is evident by reactions to similar murders in the house of Atreus: Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter; Clytaemnestra murders for revenge; Orestes murders Clytaemnestra for killing Agamemnon; there is much killing, yet in the end, only one is condemned. Agamemnon is never criticized for killing his daughter, except by Clytaemnestra. But she is immediately judged:

> Mad with ambition,
> shrilling pride! — some Fury
> crazed with the carnage rages through your brain —
> I can see the flecks of blood inflame your eyes!
> But vengeance comes — you'll lose your loved ones,
> stroke for painful stroke.
> (*Agamemnon* 1452-1457)

A woman killing her husband is like a lamb tearing the flesh from a lion.

Soon after Orestes' murdering deed, the chorus soothes his guilt by saying, "But you've done well. Don't burden yourself / with bad omens, lash yourself with guilt" (*The Libation Bearers* 1044-1045). Clytaemnestra's crime was in betraying a code of power. Agamemnon's killing of his daughter was not so appalling because he ruled over her. Orestes' killing of his mother is forgivable because men have dominion over all women. But a woman killing her husband is like a lamb tearing the flesh from a lion. These unbalanced reactions reveal a woman's inferior social status, and it is just this subordinate standing that ensures Clytaemnestra's doom.

Incidentally, the Greek social structure that empowers the few and represses the many could have had a similar effect on a male who challenged the authority of a more powerful man. For instance, had a male slave committed the crime that either Antigone or Clytaemnestra committed, he would have obviously been doomed. Just as the slave is doomed by the Greek social structure, so are women who are relegated to inferior positions.

Still, it must be noted that both Clytaemnestra and Antigone enjoyed the status of royalty. In fact, Queen Clytaemnestra must have occupied the highest status in Thebes while her king was away. Nevertheless, their royal status could not save them for their adversaries enjoyed even higher statuses. When viewed within the context of their own class, Clytaemnestra and Antigone were still relegated to an inferior standing. And it is this inferior standing that ensures their doom.

In addition to the Greek social repression of women, Aeschylus illustrates their powerlessness by the depletion of the Furies' power to avenge wronged women. The only defense women had against man's supremacy is eliminated by the end of Aeschylus' *The Eumenides*. In Greek mythology, when a woman, especially a mother, is harmed, she is avenged by The Furies: goddesses draped in black, their heads swarming with snakes, their eyes oozing blood. The fear of drawing the wrath of the "hounds of mother's hate" (*The Libation Bearers* 1053) is usually enough to prevent men from harming women. The Furies are largely all women have to protect themselves from men. But by the end of *The Eumenides*, the Furies have been stripped of their ability to avenge women, saying:

> And I, robbed of my birthright, suffering, great with wrath
> ...
> we the daughter of Night,
> our power stripped, cast down.
> (*The Eumenides* 822-833).

The debilitation of the Furies' power is another way Aeschylus exposes the vulnerability of women in a male-dominated society.

Both Aeschylus and Sophocles show that women are not only able to battle against men, but that they can execute their will with strength and resolve. Although Ismene represents a prevalent attitude toward women when she suggests that, by nature, women are not meant to battle against men, this notion is discredited by the boldness of Clytaemnestra and Antigone's deeds, as well as the boldness of their convictions that what they did was right. In addition, these authors reveal, through the lamentable plights of Clytaemnestra and Antigone, women's powerlessness in the face of the Greek social structure. And finally, the powerlessness women experienced is further developed by Aeschylus who exposes the depletion of the Furies' power.

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This essay was written for Joan Peterson's Greek Thought Seminar.

What Is a Martyr?

Erin Brennan

Herman Melville and Miguel de Unamuno utilize the image of martyrdom in their respective stories *Billy Budd* and "Saint Emmanuel the Good, Martyr." *Webster's Dictionary* defines martyr as "1) a person who willingly suffers death rather than renounce his or her religion," and "2) a person who suffers on behalf of a cause." However, it is imperative that we understand this term in its latter sense, more so than the first to fully comprehend the martyrdoms of Captain Vere and Don Emmanuel. Both of these characters portray the ultimate expression of martyrdom. **Although different from our common definition of the word "martyr" (one who dies because of refusal to renounce religious beliefs), both characters go through great suffering of mind and spirit to stand up for what they believe to be right.**

Don Emmanuel, the title character of Miguel de Unamuno's short story, is a martyr because he suffers throughout his life to make people believe in what he deems hopeless (the existence of the afterlife). A paradoxical character, Don Emmanuel lives a life of contradiction as an atheist Catholic priest. Emmanuel's saintliness comes from his willingness to ignore his personal beliefs to perpetuate the belief of God and the afterlife in his parishioners. The narrator introduces Emmanuel's non-belief when he refrains from reciting a section of the Apostle's Creed, a central dogma of the Catholic faith. When the congregation recites their belief in the resurrection of the flesh and eternal life, the narrator writes, ". . . the voice of Don Emmanuel was submerged, drowned in the voice of the populace. . . In truth, he was silent" (216). The above line hints at Don Emmanuel's true religious belief. He recites the entire Creed along with the parishioners until he reaches the moment when he must say that he believes in the afterlife. Clearly, one may then gather

that Don Emmanuel stays true to his atheist beliefs. Don Emmanuel emphasizes this belief when he states his view of children who are stillborn. Don Emmanuel says, "A child stillborn, or one who dies soon after birth, is the most terrible of mysteries to me. It's as if it were a suicide. Or as if the child were crucified" (219). In other words, a stillborn child does not have the chance to feign a happy existence on earth before it returns to the nothingness which is death. Although he believes that life is a meaningless farce, it represents a chance for a human being to achieve temporal happiness. But when children die so young, they are not given the chance that most people are given, the chance of the joy of life before they return to the reality of death. So, why does Don Emmanuel choose to hide the truth from his parishioners? He tells Lazarus, "The truth? The truth, Lazarus, is perhaps something so unbearable, so terrible, something so deadly, that simple people could not live with it!" (237). Don Emmanuel suffers from knowledge of this truth, the truth that life is strictly temporal and has no bounds past death. His is a bleak existence, yet he would not let others know this truth because he is aware of how painful it is. Instead, he suffers alone. Don Emmanuel chooses to deal with this truth by sacrificing himself. He describes his belief in the following passage:

He believes that life is a meaningless farce.

> As for true religion, all religions are true as long as they give spiritual life to the people who profess them, as long as they console them for having been born only to die. . . Mine consists in consoling myself by consoling others, even though the consolation I give them is not ever mine. (238)

The above passage shows Don Emmanuel's martyrdom. He devotes all of his energy towards the people who look to him for guidance. Don Emmanuel understands that there is no consolation that will erase the effects of the truth that he

has learned. His only aid is to console his parishioners about the truth. This helps him through his time on earth. Furthermore, Emmanuel is conscious of the fact that he has the chance to save himself. He acknowledges, "I was meant to live for my village, and die for it too. How should I save my soul if I were not to save the soul of my village as well? . . . I must not throw away my village to win my soul," (223). Don Emmanuel realizes that leaving the priesthood will save his soul, insofar as only then may he be at peace with himself. Only then will Don Emmanuel be able to reconcile his belief to his way of life, as an atheist. However, Emmanuel follows the selfless route and decides to put the common good first. As a priest, Don Emmanuel may instill a hope that he lives without into the life of his parishioners.

Don Emmanuel's motives are in no way selfish. Lazarus, upon returning to Spain, is recruited to Emmanuel's cause. Lazarus is reborn and later tells the narrator, "I really understood his motives and his saintliness; . . . In trying to convert me to his holy cause . . . [he] was doing it to protect the peace, the happiness, the illusions, perhaps, of his charges" (237). Although he is an atheist, Don Emmanuel is clearly a saint because he wants to protect his charges from the truth of existence, the truth that their lives have no purpose on earth. The truth is that eternal paradise waits not for them, because it is merely a delusion. He sacrifices himself to perpetuate their belief in God because faith is the only thing that will console them. Don Emmanuel later adds to Lazarus' description, when he says, "I am put here to give life to the souls of my charges, to make them happy, to make them dream they are immortal—and not to destroy them" (238). Emmanuel is aware of the profundity of the truth with which he lives. He understands that telling the parishioners his truth will destroy their reason for living. It will destroy the essence of life for them, that is, to live well on earth because God will reward you in heaven. Without a heaven to go home to, many people will die in utter hopelessness and reject their

temporal happiness, the only happiness available to them. He also knows that his only purpose is to save others from arriving at this same truth.

Don Emmanuel exemplifies his martyrdom when he describes his mission to Lazarus in the following passage:

> My life, Lazarus, is a kind of continual suicide, or a struggle against suicide, which is the same thing... I have helped poor villagers to die well, ignorant, illiterate villagers... I have been able to see into the black abyss of their life-weariness... For our part, Lazarus, let us go on with our kind of suicide of working for the people, and let them dream their life as the lake dreams the heavens. (243-244)

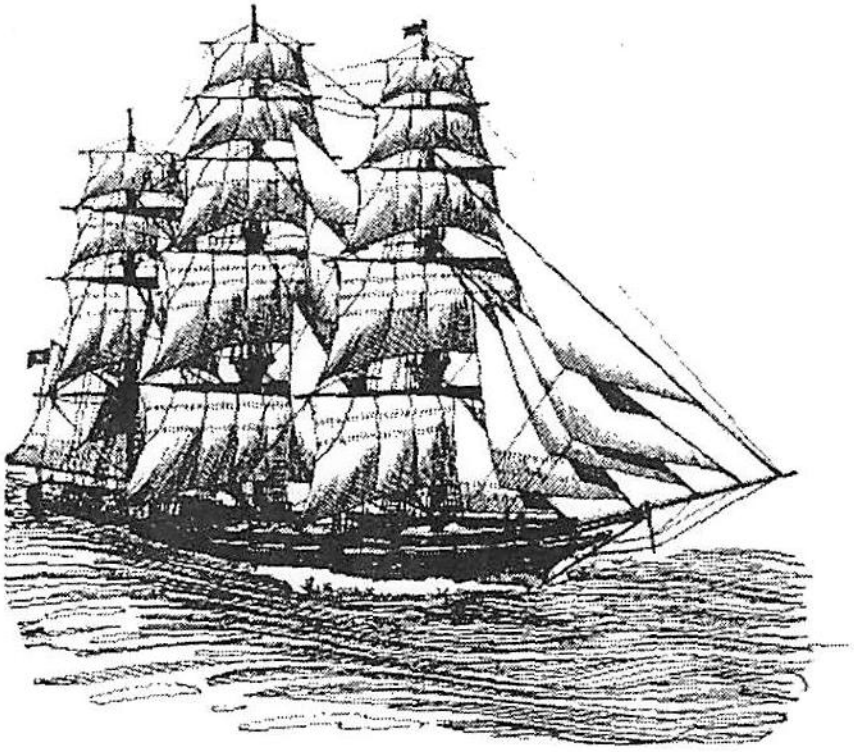
The above excerpt underlines Emmanuel's main focus, to allow his villagers to die well. As far as he is concerned, dying well simply means to die ignorant of what awaits after death, nothingness. Therefore, Don Emmanuel continually kills a part of himself, or his only chance at happiness, to prevent these villagers from attaining this knowledge.

Captain Vere must go against what he believes.

Seeing Don Emmanuel as a martyr, helps us to see Herman Melville's Captain Vere as a martyr. Captain Vere plays a crucial role as a martyr through his belief that Billy Budd should not be killed for the murder of Claggart. Captain Vere is a respectable man who admires Billy Budd's innocence. Unfortunately, he is condemned to carry out the orders to execute Billy. Before he does so, Captain Vere first goes before a committee, eloquently stating the case for Billy's execution, although, in his heart, he is strongly against it. The Captain's words to the committee in charge of sentencing Billy are quite moving: "But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool" (60). Captain Vere must go against what he believes in his own heart and sentence Billy Budd to death. He must do so to save the navy from the

possibility of another mutiny. He must do what is right under the law, not what is right according to nature. In order to make such an objective judgment, Captain Vere must utilize Billy as a scapegoat.

Captain Vere's fealty to the law is also apparent when he says, "Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however



pitilessly that law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it" (60). Regardless of his personal feelings, Vere is the Captain of a ship in the British Navy. His loyalty belongs to his supervisors, to the King, and not to Billy Budd. As a captain of the ship, Vere is obligated to operate under the law of the Mutiny Act. Vere comments,

"War looks but to the frontage, the appearance. And the Mutiny Act, War's child, takes after the father. Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose" (61). The above describes the type of law under which Captain Vere serves. It is an unforgiving law because it looks only to the facts. And the fact remains that Billy does indeed kill Claggart, regardless of his intent. In other words, it does not matter why Billy Budd killed Claggart. Captain Vere must use this law as a foundation for the execution of Billy Budd. In this regard, it is clear that Captain Vere has no other choice than to execute one he deems innocent if he is to save the rest of the navy. Just as Don Emmanuel sacrifices his only opportunity for temporal happiness for the good of his parishioners, so too must Captain Vere keep the common good of the navy in mind when he makes his decision. Realistically, all that matters is that a crime was committed, and now Billy must pay the penalty with his life.

His loyalty belongs to his supervisors.

Captain Vere is fully aware of the vital consequences pending his decision. Vere presents the committee with the following hypothetical situation:

> Even could you explain to them . . .they, long molded by arbitrary discipline, have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness that might qualify them to comprehend and discriminate. No, to the people [Billy's] deed, . . . will be plain homicide committed in a flagrant act of mutiny. What penalty for that should follow, they know. But it does not follow. . . You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? Ay. They know the well-founded alarm—the panic it struck throughout England. (Melville 61)

The above excerpt illustrates Captain Vere's knowledge of the nature of his men. They are men trained under military discipline. They know that every action they take has its

consequences. Vere argues that these men know what awaits Billy Budd after the murder of Claggart. The sailors know that Billy awaits execution. However, they will not understand the circumstances which would allow Billy Budd to escape this untimely death. Rather, they would mutiny on behalf of the unfair treatment Billy Budd receives over their treatment as common sailors. The Captain knows that the sailors cannot comprehend the immense torment which is taking place in their Captain's heart. In this manner, one may look at Captain Vere as a martyr because, although it pains him greatly, he goes against his own convictions for the benefit of the entire British Navy.

Perhaps a more convincing argument that Captain Vere is a martyr lies in his final words to the committee. He concludes his argument in the following passage: "I feel as you do for this unfortunate boy. But did he know our hearts, I take him to be of that generous nature that he would feel even for us on whom this military necessity so heavy a compulsion is laid" (61). In other words, Captain Vere must sacrifice a man he knows has done nothing wrong to appease the angry masses. One may then argue that Vere's plight is akin to God's when God sacrifices His own son for the salvation of the Jews. The Captain truly suffers as a result of his own decision to execute Billy Budd. So much so that when wounded in battle and on the brink of death, Captain Vere's last words are, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd" (76). This example shows that Captain Vere suffers greatly because of the decision he makes. He knows that it was for the betterment of the common good, although it pains him dearly to think of Billy's death.

Herman Melville's Captain Vere and Miguel de Unamuno's Don Emmanuel both exemplify the characteristics of true martyrs. However, they both fulfill different criteria for martyrdom. Instead of thinking of a martyr along

the lines of the Christians thrown to the lions, it is necessary to think of a martyr as someone who is willing to suppress his or her own beliefs and convictions for the sake of the common good. For instance, Don Emmanuel, although an atheist, is a prime example of a saint in that he sacrifices his entire life to perpetuate the belief in God which he does not share with his parishioners. Furthermore, if an atheist may be a martyr, it follows that Vere, a captain in the British Navy, may be a martyr as well. Captain Vere does not sacrifice his life; rather he sacrifices his good nature in order to preserve the unity of the British Navy. Therefore, according to Melville and Unamuno, our definitions of the word martyr need to be expanded because a martyr may have many faces.

Works Cited

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Accepting the Offering

Kelly Myers

Leslie Marmon Silko doesn't simply tell the story of a young American Indian who is imprisoned by his memories of World War II and the brother he lost—she paints it. She uses color to illustrate the steps of Tayo's progression from the confinement of a hospital room, to alcoholism, accepting the help of medicine men, and setting off on a physical/spiritual journey to retrieve his uncle's cattle. **Silko contrasts the absence of color with the vividness of color to reflect Tayo's transformation from isolation and self-torment to the rediscovery of the world around him.** A sunrise is created through the transitions of color throughout the story. This sunrise is symbolic of Tayo's movement from darkness into light and his embracing of a new day.

Silko devotes one of the first pages of her novel to the word "sunrise." She presents an array of reds, blues, oranges, and yellows that slowly build a sunrise. She portrays Tayo's initial response to his suffering through darkness and the absence of color. Symbolically, this is nighttime—the sun is still asleep. As Tayo starts to confront his problems, shades of red begin to appear—the sun is peeking out. When he is able to accept help from the medicine man, he is offered blue cornmeal—the sun begins to light the sky. Upon embarking on his journey to find the cattle, he is surrounded by orange rock—the sun climbs higher; red fades into orange. When he regains his love and connection with the earth, there is a burst of yellow—the sun has risen, the sky is bright. Sunrise!

After returning from the war, Tayo is in a white-walled hospital room convinced that he is invisible. The color, or lack of color, reflects his state of mind. Overwhelmed by war memories and the loss of his brother and uncle Josiah, he finds his only comfort in a colorless environment. He feels as

if he is trapped inside a thick fog where "the smoke had been dense; visions and memories of the past did not penetrate there, and he had drifted in colors of smoke, where there was no pain, only pale, pale gray of the north wall by his bed" (15). Even when he is away from the hospital, he still craves the emptiness and whiteness. He wants to go back "where he could merge with the walls and the ceiling, shimmering white, remote from everything" (32). At one point he feels as if he can finally rest because "There was a peaceful silence beneath the sounds of the wind; it was a silence with no trace of people. It was the silence of hard dry clay and old juniper wood bleached white" (21). His inability to separate the past and the present causes constant vomiting that intensifies his feeling of hollowness. He finds temporary peace with fellow veterans filling him with beer. Tayo submits to this emptiness again by blaming himself for the drought. In a time of drought the absence of water leaves the plant life devoid of color. In taking responsibility for the drought, Tayo is connecting himself to images of barrenness and colorlessness.

He finds his only comfort in a colorless environment.

Along with presenting the absence of color, Silko also introduces colors with negative implications. She links Tayo's anguish and inner struggle to the wind and the color red. The first sign of Tayo's connection to the wind is "The wind had blown since late February, and it did not stop after April. They said it had been that way for the past six years while he was gone" (11). All of his confusion and misery become physical in the image of the red wind. Red dust consumes the land the way that Tayo's pain consumes his body. "The wind was warming up for the afternoon, and within a few hours the sky over the valley would be dense with red dust, and along the ground the wind would catch waves of reddish sand and make them race across the dry red clay flats" (19). Just as the empty valley fills with red dust, Tayo's hollow and numb body is engulfed by tangled memories. We are told that "he'd almost been convinced he was brittle was brittle red clay, slipping away with the wind, a little more each day"

(27). At times the wind is so loud it is difficult to carry on a conversation. It reaches a point where "It took a great deal of energy to be a human, and the more the wind blew and the sun moved southwest, the less energy Tayo had" (25). Instead of seeing nature as beautiful, it reflects and contributes to his pain and suffering.

When Tayo accepts the help of the medicine men and sets off after his uncle's cattle, the violent red images begin to soften, and there is a transition to kinder blues and oranges. The transition to these colors represents Tayo's progression from the entrapment of his hateful memories to an appreciation of the natural world. Blue imagery occurs when Ku'oosh the medicine man brings blue cornmeal to cure Tayo. The other medicine man, Betonie, gives him a ceremony that involves the stars, mountain, cattle, and a woman. This mysterious woman who awakens Tayo's heart and opens his eyes to nature carries a blue silk shawl. Silko refers to the color orange in the woman's apricot tree. She deliberately chooses a tree that bears orange fruit and links it to the woman who plays a key role in Tayo's healing. Along his journey, Tayo passes "big orange boulders" and an "orange sandrock mesa" (184). Silko specifically mentions that the land Tayo travels through as he draws closer to finding the cattle and reconnecting with his soul has an orange tint.

Yellow is the final color in the transition. Though yellow symbolizes the completion of Tayo's journey, Silko uses it throughout the story. There is a pattern of yellow animals which includes a yellow striped cat, a yellow dog, a yellow bull, a yellow mountain lion, and a yellow snake. Josiah teaches Tayo that "only humans resisted what they saw outside themselves. Animals did not resist. But they persisted, because they became part of the wind" (27). Perhaps it is because of their connection to nature that the animals are yellow. When Tayo releases the burden of his past and reconnects with the earth, he too is surrounded by the color yellow. There are sections in which the references to yellow are so dense they slow the reader down. For example, Silko makes a specific choice to repeat the word "yellow" in these consecutive sentences: "He kept his back to the wind and poured yellow pollen from Josiah's tobacco sack into the cup of his hand. He leaned close to the earth and sprinkled pinches of yellow pollen into the four footprints" (196). Immediately preceding all of the yellow imagery, Tayo makes the realization that "He had lost nothing" (219). He says, "Only the sky had changed, washed clear of the dust and haze which had swirled off the red clay flats the summer before" (220). He releases the violent winds that once stirred inside of his hollow body. The next few pages are teeming with the color yellow and the sun. Tayo has found peace.

"The light makes me vomit."

The sun itself plays a key role in the story. In regaining his connection with the earth, he also reconciles with the sun. This reconciliation symbolizes his movement out of darkness into light. Much like a character, the sun is a consistent part of the story. In the beginning, Tayo cannot tolerate the sun in his room because "The light makes me vomit" (31). Even when the sun is up he feels as if the sky is empty. Instead of enjoying the warmth or life provided by the sun, Tayo complains, "The sun was too hot and it made the color of the sky too pale blue" (40). At this point Tayo is very removed from nature. It isn't until he is with Betonie that he stands "with his feet in the bright circle of sunlight below the center of the

log ceiling open for smoke" (119). At this moment when his ceremony is about to begin, he dips his feet into the light. He is preparing to immerse himself once again in the world around him. By the end he is able to say, "The sun felt good" (220).

The first line of the book reads, "Tayo didn't sleep well that night," and from there we get a glimpse at the nightmares that haunt him. He is trapped at sunset. When he returns from the war he is unable to wake up to a new day. The darkness and nightmares continue through the daylight hours. The journey of following Betonie's advice, meeting the woman, and finding the cattle allow Tayo to embrace the dawning of a new day. He learns that "the instant of dawn was an event which in a single moment gathered all things together—the last stars, the mountaintops, the clouds, and the winds celebrating this coming. The power of each day spilled over the hills in great silence. Sunrise" (182). Tayo is able to leave the darkness of night behind and welcome a new beginning.

Silko's message of embracing the natural world comes to life through her use of color. She uses bold, primary colors to paint her message into the mind of the reader. We follow Tayo on his journey and are silently encouraged to learn his lessons and follow his example.

Sunrise
accept this offering,
Sunrise

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